

A Personal Narrative Exemplar

May 24

I should have been sleeping, I admit, but thoughts of Sofia kept fatigue at bay. Our first school-sponsored ski trip to Wachusett had taken place that night, the Thursday before Christmas, and I was still remembering how hot Sofia looked with her wind-cherried cheeks and the blue knit cap that matched her eyes so nicely. “You’re so funny!” she had told me on the bus trip home, pressing a hand against my shoulder. I swear I could still feel the spot where she touched me, even though I had been wearing this bulky new North Face jacket at the time — the one Mom had bought for my birthday back in October.



Anyway, that was the source of my insomnia, and that’s when I noticed the strip of light ignite under my bedroom door. The glow was dull and distant, so I knew the source came from our kitchen down the hall. Someone was awake and it could only be Mom or my little brother, Derek, but I could hear him breathing in the bed across the room.

I glanced at the red digital numbers on my alarm clock. 12:35 a.m. Odd wasn’t the word for it. Mom worked six days a week at Target — had ever since Dad left us last May. When she hit the bed, she was out. I had listened to her snores from the neighboring bedroom more than once.

Quietly, I lifted the blanket and placed my feet on the cool wooden floor. A shiver climbed me like a snake. I approached the door, turning the doorknob slowly so as not to make a noise. Creeping down the hall without making the floorboards creak was even more difficult. Finally, though, I reached the point where I could peer around the corner and see part of the kitchen table.

Leaning forward, I saw Mom’s frayed pink slippers first. She sat in her usual place, at the head of the table, in the captain’s seat that Dad once occupied. Gradually, my eye advanced to the point where she came into full view. She wore her striped nightgown and cradled her head in her hand, a cup of tea on the table before her. The steam swirled up in tiny white ribbons, and it looked like she was studying the vapor before it parted around her downcast face.

I felt awkward, like I was spying on her, and was about to step out and say hi when I saw that single tear. It dropped like a fat pearl, darkening the green tablecloth where it landed. She was crying, all right — not a loud, sobbing cry, but a frighteningly silent one. The fingers of her left hand had her forehead in a grip. You could see it through the dangling curtain of almond hair.

“What’s going on?” I wondered. Mom seemed fine at dinner, with the usual “How was school today?” and “Be careful on those slopes, Robby” before I left. She had just arrived home from a day shift, and we were eating frozen pepperoni and sausage pizza. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary. It was just another microwave night where the air smelled of grease and tomatoes.

Then I noticed, right in front of her, the checkbook, a piece of paper with writing on it, and some mail, the envelopes opened hungrily like baby bird mouths. That’s what did it. The light bulb flickered weakly in my mind, then snapped on. They were bills. I had heard her on the phone earlier in the week, her voice urgent, saying something about electricity and heating oil, but it never really registered and I went about my business like I always do.

She sniffed. I’d never heard my mom sniff, either. It was the type of thing she corrected me and Derek about all the time, telling us to get a Kleenex like civilized boys do. It was the saddest sound, that sniff, and it

seemed all the lonelier in the small hours of the night. Mom lifted the piece of paper at that moment, staring at the long list. My heart clutched for my throat when I recognized the handwriting. It was my Christmas list — ridiculously long, ridiculously expensive, and ridiculously selfish. Or so it seemed now, as I imagined her reading about the Call of Duty video game, NBA shirts, and new Nike basketball shoes I'd asked for. "You work at Target," I remembered telling her a few weeks back. "You can use your discount. Or *Santa* can use it, I mean." At the time, we had laughed together, only it didn't seem so funny any more.

I pulled back again so I could only see her slipper and one of the veins on top of her foot. I could hear the wall clock ticking and the refrigerator motor's sad hum. My head felt heavy and feverish all of a sudden. Had I done this to her? Should I come out and tear the list up? Would that solve the problem?

In fact, I did nothing of the sort. I silently stepped backwards and, as if I was hiding from something, covered myself with the darkness of my room. My brother muttered something in a dream. It was me who was sleepless and all confused — but like a coward, I never said or did a thing about what I witnessed.

Instead, on Christmas morning, I opened two new video games, three new shirts, and the shiny white Nikes I'd seen on a shelf at the store weeks earlier. Usually I'd be the happiest kid in town, giving Mom an obligatory hug and peck on the cheek. But that Christmas was different. I felt depressed by the gifts, by my mom's tired smile, and by the fact that I chose to keep them. I debated telling her to return them, that it was too much, that I had taken for granted the fact that she could buy all the things my friends got from their parents. But I did nothing — nothing! I convinced myself that it would be worse, and she would feel humiliated if I admitted I'd seen her like that.

For me, Christmas lost its innocence that year. For me, Christmas turned into the inside of a drum — dark and hollow — never to be the same as it was when gifts fell out of the sky, landing neatly wrapped and ribboned under the fragrant balsams.

Comment: Many personal narrative examples feature "firsts" like the first time I dove off a cliff or hit a homerun or won a race. This one, by request of the 7th grade teachers, was designed to feature a more subtle emotion — namely, the first time a boy learns that the world is bigger than it seemed when he was a kid and that adults sometimes harm themselves, financially or otherwise, to meet unreasonable expectations.

Shared with a class, teachers might ask for elements of setting and characters. The setting details are meant to create mood and the character ones to show emotion, character, and internal problems. Students might generate a list of memorable lines in small groups or as a whole group. Teachers can then list them on the board and ask students to categorize them — a higher-order skill that would make Bloom smile from atop his pyramid.

Possible setting categories:

- objects
- lighting
- temperature
- sensory details
- colors
- actions
- figurative language

Possible character categories:

- hair color/type

- facial features
- body parts
- clothing
- actions
- dialogue
- colors
- sensory details
- figurative language

Finally, teachers can talk about the underlying message invoked by the personal narrative. This along with other examples showing other emotions should give students something to emulate as they begin to write.